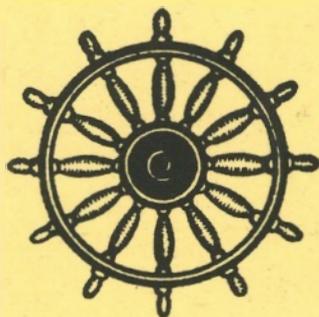


THE
S.S. "GREAT WESTERN"

THE FIRST ATLANTIC LINER

GRAHAME FARR



BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
LOCAL HISTORY PAMPHLETS

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The illustration and some of the lettering on the cover are taken from the cover of the booklet produced in 1938 for the Centenary.

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THE STEAMSHIP *GREAT WESTERN*

by GRAHAME FARR

Behold the Empress of the Western Seas,
Braving alike the billows and the breeze,
Our Island's boast, our noble city's pride,
Now sails triumphant through the opposing tide..

The interest with which the nation followed the various moves in the battle of the Atlantic ferry during the late thirties of the last century was even more intense than that engendered nowadays by the periodic arguments for and against a third 'Queen'. The paramount topic of the time was engineering in its various facets — trains, manufacturing machinery, and steamships—and, as far as the people of Bristol were concerned, they had all three literally in their midst.

The idea of crossing the Atlantic by steam was not new, for there had been at least seventeen passages by vessels with steam power of sorts, all but two, however, having taken the easier routes to the south. Of the two, the *Savannah*, in 1819, had used steam for only 80 hours of the 29 days she was at sea, while some years later, in 1833, the *Royal William* was under steam for about 14 days of the 19 occupied by her passage. Both passages were from west to east and both were undertaken for the purpose of selling the vessel. The idea of a steamship built especially to make regular North Atlantic passages was fairly certainly of Bristol origin, although it is doubtful if we shall ever know to whom we should give the credit. The popular legend is that at a meeting of the Great Western Railway Committee in October, 1835, someone spoke in wonder at the length of the line from London to Bristol, whereat Isambard Brunel asked jokingly why they should not extend it to New York. The suggestion was treated as a jest by most of the audience, but Thomas Guppy, an inventor of repute and a leading spirit in the railway scheme, considered the matter seriously. While he canvassed for support the idea became national property and in the following month some London merchants issued the prospectus for a British and American Steam Navigation Company. In Liverpool the Transatlantic Steamship Company was promoted at about the same time.

Subsequent events suggest that Guppy's proposal was at a more advanced stage than others when the prospectus of the Great Western Steamship Company, of Bristol, was issued in January, 1836. This stated that the ambition of the Company was the establishment of regular lines of steamships between Bristol and those Western Ports to which her geographical position renders her

most eligible, the first to be directed towards the United States of America.' The capital of £250,000 was quickly subscribed, and at the first General Meeting of the shareholders held on 3 March, the following directors were appointed: Peter Maze (Chairman), Robert Bright, Henry Bush, Thomas Richard Guppy, Robert Scott, Thomas Kington, Henry Godwin, Thomas Bonville Were, and Lieutenant Christopher Claxton, R.N., (Managing Director). The first five were, incidentally, also members of the Great Western Railway Committee. The Trustees, who became the 'Subscribing Owners' for the purpose of registering the steamship *Great Western*, were John Harford, Joseph Cookson and John Vining.

Brunel was appointed to design the first ship. He gave his services free, and there is little doubt the Company reaped the benefit of much forethought on his part for his papers show that he had been interested in the design of large steamships since 1829. Seeking a builder, they chose William Patterson, 'known as a man open to conviction and not prejudiced in favour of either quaint or old-fashioned notions in ship building.' With his partner John Mercer, he had had varied experience of ship-building at Bristol, including coastal steamers as well as larger ocean-going sailing vessels. Their yard was at Wapping, alongside the Wapping Road at its end near Prince Street Bridge. Here the ways were positioned so that advantage could be taken of the width given to the Floating Harbour by the confluence of the Frome.

In June, 1836 the keel was laid, and with a length of 205 feet it was the longest that had been laid down at that time. As the emphasis was on great longitudinal strength, the scarfing of the keel timbers was done with extraordinary care.¹ It may be that some doubts had been entertained as to whether an assembly of this length would prove sufficiently rigid and when this task was successfully completed, great ceremony prevailed at the raising of the stern post on the afternoon of 28 July. For the onlookers there was a brave display of bunting and the percussion of cannon, while the directors and their friends partook of a 'cold collation' in the mould loft.

In a city where virtually everyone had some connexion with the

1. Brunel described the construction of the hull at the first Annual General Meeting of the Company on 1 March, 1838.—'Her floors are of great length and over-run each other: they are firmly dowelled and bolted, first in pairs, and then together, by means of 1½" bolts, about 24' in length, driven in four parallel rows, scarfing about 4'. The scantling is equal in size to that of our line-of-battle ships: it is filled in solid, and was caulked within and without up to the first futtock heads previously to planking, and all to above this height of English oak. She is most firmly and closely trussed with iron and wooden diagonals and shelf-pieces, which, with the whole of her upper works, are fastened with screws and nuts, to a much greater extent than has hitherto been put to practice . . .'

sea or seaborne trade, the progress of the *Great Western* was followed with eager interest. The supporters of the venture were on a rising tide of enthusiasm and were in no mood to be damped during the following August by gloomy predictions from that learned authority on steam power, the Reverend Doctor Dionysius Lardner. That worthy visited Bristol for the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, (somewhat irreverently dubbed 'the Wise Week' in the local press). He had held forth on the subject at Liverpool in the previous December, where, as mentioned above, they had just made plans for an Atlantic steamship company, and he is recorded as having said.—'As to the project of making the voyage directly from New York to Liverpool, it was perfectly chimerical, and they might as well talk of making a voyage from New York to the Moon.' At Bristol he declared he was not adverse to Atlantic steam passages, but he did 'feel that great caution should be used to carry the experiment into effect.' He tackled such problems as the effect of salt water on boilers, the use of condensers, and the 'locomotive duty' of coals as shown by statistics of the Falmouth-Corfu mail packets. Eventually, after considerable figuring, he came to the conclusion that '2,080 miles is the longest run a steamer could encounter,—at the end of that distance she would require a relay of coals.'

Brunel attended the meeting and pointed out errors in the calculations, declaring also that the old vessels on the Corfu mail run could not be expected to average more than $7\frac{1}{4}$ miles an hour, but a vessel constructed on the latest approved principles could accomplish nine or even ten miles an hour with ease.

It is interesting to note that Lardner again spoke on the subject at the Association's 1837 meeting at Liverpool, and that he was appointed to a special committee formed to ascertain 'the average locomotive duty of a ton of coals per horse power in steam vessels.' He invented an ingenious 'Self-recording Steam Journal' to assist in the research and he and his committee are said to have ventured to make a passage in the *Great Western*.

The launch took place at five minutes past ten on the morning of 19 July, 1837, before a crowd estimated at 50,000 people. Lieutenant Claxton broke a bottle of madeira over the figurehead² and Mrs. Miles named the vessel. Then '... the dog shores having been struck away, the screw was applied, and a great shout arose—“She moves.” . . When the beautiful and majestic vessel had glided into her adopted element, which she did like “a thing of life” and floated gracefully and steadily on the water, the multitudes in every

2. 'A demi-figure of Neptune, with the trident admirably carved and gilded, on each side dolphins finished in imitation of bronze.'

direction rent the air with their acclamations . . . ' An hour or so later there was a banquet for 300 persons within the hull, Peter Maze being in the Chair, supported by the Mayor (James George), and William Miles, one of the most prominent local merchant-shipowners.

The engines were made by Maudslay, Sons and Field, at Lambeth (where Guppy had been apprenticed) and, rather than transport them to Bristol for fitting, it was decided to sail the vessel round to the Thames. Her paddle shaft (which weighed $6\frac{1}{2}$ tons, and was $18\frac{3}{4}$ ins. in diameter) was forged by Acramans, an extensive local foundry, and must have been taken with her as cargo on this first voyage. She left Cumberland Basin on 18 August, was towed to the mouth of the river by the steam tug *Lion* and from thence was accompanied by the coastal packet *Benledi*. She had then, and remained throughout her career for auxiliary use, four masted schooner rig with provision for a square topsail and mainsail on the fore-mast. Her underwater body proved to be well designed for she was under sail for four-fifths of the passage, steered well, and at times left the accompanying steam vessel far behind. She arrived at Gravesend at 4 p.m. on the 22nd and was soon alongside the fitting-out wharf.

Towards the end of the year Lieutenant James Hosken, R.N., was appointed commander of the new vessel. He had been born at Devonport of a naval family and himself began his career at sea during the latter part of the French Wars. Afterwards he saw service in the Baltic, Mediterranean and West Indies, then commanded a revenue cruiser in the Channel, and later again went deep-sea in Falmouth (steam) mail packets. His whole varied career contributed to a most versatile personality which could not have been bettered for the job in hand. He was sent first to London to familiarize himself with his charge, and in December to New York to complete arrangements for ship-brokerage, berthage and warehousing.

In March, 1838, the first advertisements of sailings appeared in the Bristol newspapers. There were to be 128 state rooms divided between the upper saloon, under saloon, fore cabin, poop, and cuddy, but all were of one class, with a fare of 35 guineas. There were '20 good bed places' for servants, who were carried at half fare, as also were children, and there was room for a small quantity of light goods at £5 per ton. She was to sail 'as soon as the engines have been fully proved' early in April.

A week later the first advertisements appeared for the British and American Steam Navigation Company which realised that their

vessel, the *British Queen*, would not be ready in time for the first season and which had chartered the *Sirius* from the Saint George Steam Packet Company. Her fares were to be in three classes—cabin, 35 guineas; second cabin, 20 guineas; steerage, 8 guineas. She was advertised to start on 28 March from London, and on 2 April from Cork, to which port intending passengers from the Bristol area were offered a free passage by cross-Channel packet. The *Sirius* was normally employed between Cork and London, and was of slightly more than half the tonnage of the *Great Western*. It speaks well for her construction and for the skill of her master, Lieutenant Richard Roberts, R.N., and her engineer John Lambert, that she successfully completed two round voyages to New York.

The first trial trip of the *Great Western* took place on 24 March. As the largest steam vessel in European waters and undoubtedly the first constructed as an Atlantic packet, she attracted a vast audience. A reporter wrote: 'Our readers have only to fancy a large man-of-war of 80 guns, without the usual warlike appearance, moved by the power of steam.' The trial was not without incident. She was reported to have steered wildly at first, but an extra man was put at the wheel and she then 'cut through the water at a spanking rate.' Then a sailing barge crossed her bows and to avoid a collision her engines were stopped and reversed. She avoided the barge but fouled a vessel moored on her port side which she severely damaged while avoiding damage to herself. The *Comet*, a popular Gravesend excursion steamer with a fair turn of speed was backed heavily when she offered to make a race of it, but in spite of being able to cut corners with her shallow draught, she was considerably outdistanced. Three miles below Gravesend the *Great Western* was turned and this difficult manoeuvre was accomplished with ease, affording a further proof of the perfection of her lines. Back at Blackwall in the late afternoon she was visited by many of the nobility and gentry to the great hindrance of the workmen putting the finishing touches to her internal fittings. The finish must have been fairly elaborate, and we are told that the painting in the saloon was in the style of Watteau, by Edward Thomas Parris, R.A., 'Historical Painter to Her Majesty.'

There was a further trial run four days later with eighty guests on board. Unfortunately she went aground opposite Trinity Wharf for half an hour, but floated undamaged on the rising tide and went as far as Sea Reach before turning. An improvement had been made in the paddle cranks which decreased the wash and rendered the vibration imperceptible. The *Sirius* left for Cork on the same tide, but apparently a trial of speeds was frustrated by the grounding of the larger vessel. The accident was, of course, much publicised

in rival quarters, and soon afterwards there was even more opportunity for malicious cavil.

After a few finishing touches the *Great Western* left for Bristol on 31 March. The early part of the run was nearly marred by disaster. The official statement afterwards given to the Press reads as follows :

' The *Great Western* left her moorings at Blackwall . . at 8 mins. past six this morning and at 22 mins. past seven passed Gravesend, the engines working beautifully and the progress of the vessel being highly satisfactory.

At a quarter past 8 o'clock a strong smell of burning oil was perceived to arise from the felt cloth on the upper part of the boilers which soon afterwards took fire and from the quantity of dense smoke arising from it caused much apprehension. It was, however, soon extinguished by the powerful means on board of supplying a large stream of water. The vessel having, during this time, been brought to off Leigh, an examination took place by Messrs. Maudslay and Field who were on board, who found that the workmen had improperly felted the boilers close up to the base of the chimney, and that the composition of oil and red lead with which the felt had stuck on had consequently fired, smoked and finally burst into flame.

The origin of this unpleasant occurrence having been thus satisfactorily ascertained, all further cause for alarm was allayed by its immediate removal, and as neither boilers nor engines had sustained the slightest injury preparation was made to proceed as soon as the tide should serve.'

To say the fire 'caused much apprehension' verges on understatement, for in a panic three or four stokers took a boat and rowed ashore while the officers and officials were thrown into confusion by a serious accident to Brunel. Determined, as always, to see for himself, he had begun to climb down into the fore stokehole, but stepped on a charred ladder rung which snapped. He fell on his feet, and his fall was broken by Claxton, who happened to be below, but he fell some distance, was badly shaken, and serious injury was anticipated. A boat was sent to Leigh and to Southend, but the doctors at those places were away and Brunel was eventually landed at Hole Haven where examination and a rest showed that his injuries were no more than superficial.

When the tide served—the official statement omitted to say she was aground in the mud of the Chapman sands—she proceeded to Bristol, arriving at 6 in the evening of 2 April. The passage of 700 miles was made in 60 hours which, if we deduct the four hours occupied by the stoppage, gives an average of nearly 13 miles an hour. This was satisfactory in view of the foul and strong winds experienced between Land's end and Hartland Point.

As she lay in Kingroad ready to sail for New York she had cost her owners about £53,000, of which the hull accounted for £21,374 and the engines £13,500. Some dimensional and other data may be of interest.—

Length: 207.1 ft. for tonnage; 236 ft. over all.

Breadth: 31.8 ft. for tonnage: 59.6 ft. over paddle boxes.

Depth of Hold: 23.1 ft.

Tonnage: 1230 gross: 679 net; 2300 displacement.

Cabins, etc.: After Saloon 75 ft. long, 21 ft. wide, 9 ft. high: after lower saloon 73 ft.; fore cabin 59 ft.; engine and boiler rooms 80.4 ft.

Capacity: 148 passengers: 200 tons of cargo: for trooping 300 men.

Engines: Side lever type, 2 cylinders, each 73½ ins. diameter and 7 ft. stroke.

Power: 450 nominal horse power; approximately 750 indicated horse power.

Boilers: Four of return-flue type, each with three furnaces, working at 5 lbs. steam pressure. The water was preheated in a device invented by Field.

Bunkers: 800 tons capacity, estimated as sufficient for 25 days at full speed. When empty they could be filled with water for ballast.

Paddle wheels: 28.75 ft. diameter; fixed floats 10 ft. wide, in the cycloidal form patented by Field. Normally made 15 revolutions per minute.

The *Great Western* was intended to sail at about 6 o'clock on Saturday evening, 7 April, 1838, but during the day a heavy W.N.W. gale sprang up and, as a large amount of cargo, and about 30 tons of bunker coal were still on deck, it was thought prudent to postpone the departure. Sunday morning dawned slightly more promisingly and weighing the anchor began at 9, to be completed an hour later, much cable having been paid out for safety in the tide-swept anchorage, and the windlass being stiff in action. Coal trows were still alongside when the anchor was hoisted on deck and about 80 tons had to be left behind, the amount taken being 600 tons. There were seven passengers, including one lady, but reports of the fire in the Thames estuary had scared away fifty more. On the passage down the Bristol Channel the gale was still blowing strongly from the N.W. and the tide became unfavourable at the Holms, but she managed just over ten knots for this initial stretch.

It is unfortunate that the official crew list for the first historic voyage is missing. She is said to have had 57 of all grades. The official record for her second voyage names 52, viz. the master, four mates, 5 engineers, carpenter, pilot (for Bristol Channel and Irish Coast), 13 seamen, 10 stokers, 8 trimmers, carpenter's mate, joiner, cook, boy and five apprentices, to which must be added a surgeon, at least two stewards and a stewardess. The known names of officers in this first voyage are James Hosken (master); Barnard Matthews (first mate); Lieutenant Tollevy, R.N., Berry, and Phillips (second to fourth mates, probably in this order); George Pearne (chief engineer), C. Henderson, W. Roberts, M. Julyan, and S. Edwards (junior engineers), Jacob Brooking (carpenter). Fifteen stokers and trimmers are named in the Engineer's Log, some discreditably, as will be seen. The boy was Allan, a Scot of fifteen years from Edinburgh.

The Navigating Officers' and Engineers' Logs were later reprinted in edited form. The writer had the privilege, through the courtesy

of the late Roger Ford, of Cotham, Bristol, of inspecting the original 'rough' log of the engineer. This is fully entered for the outward journey only, since Pearne died in a New York hospital after an accident which occurred as they were shutting down the boilers on arrival.

Here are a few extracts from the logs, including some items which were omitted from the published version. Extracts from the Engineers' Log are shown in parentheses.—

8 April (1838): Commences with strong gales and a short sea up, with heavy squalls. At 9 commenced heaving in the cable. At 10 weighed and proceeded slowly down Channel. At 11.30 got the anchor catted, and proceeded at full speed. All hands employed clearing decks until 8 p.m., at which time mustered crew and chose watches. At 10 moderate and fine weather, Lundy Lights N.N.E. 1½ miles.

9 April: Moderate winds and fine weather with a short high sea up. Ship pitching deep, but very easy, washed away the trident of the figurehead. At 11.30 spoke the American ship *Neponset* of Boston, from Liverpool for Boston, out 48 hours. At 4.30 p.m., thick fog.

10 April: Tried the patent logs and found them to give nine miles per hour. At 11 a.m. spoke the American ship *South America* under top-gallant sail, from Liverpool for New York; returned cheers with her.

11 April: Moderate winds and hazy at intervals, with long heavy swell from N.W. At 9 a.m. exchanged colours with a French ship running to the eastward.

12 April: Moderate winds and cloudy weather. (At 11 a.m. found it necessary to put the stokers and trimmers into two watches which they objected to. Had them up before the Captain who gave them specific orders to abide by such regulations for their working as should be made.)

13 April: Light variable winds and fine weather.

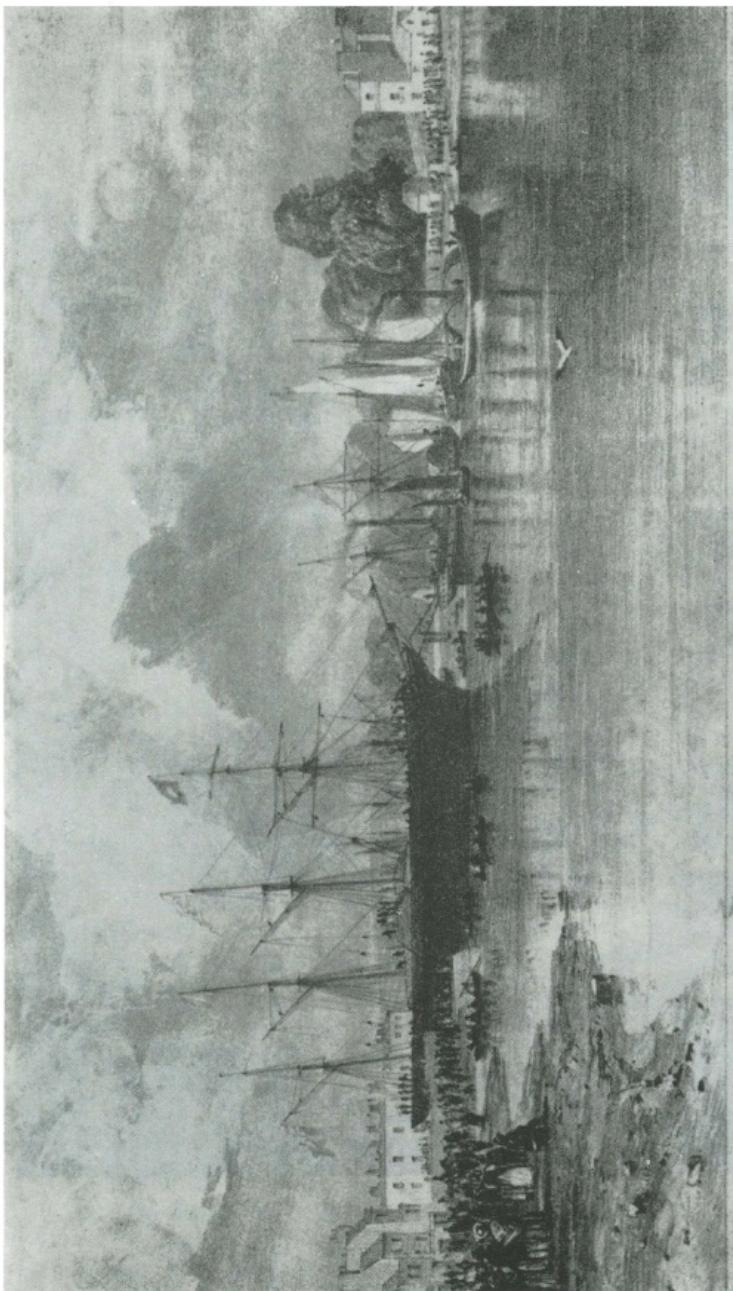
14 April: Commences with light variable winds and fine weather. At 10, squally with small rain. (At 10.33, a knocking noise existing in the larboard wheel, stopped engines. Found one semi outer paddle adrift at one end. In both wheels found several nuts loosened and two bolts gone. Tightened up nuts etc., detached loose paddle. At 12.30 p.m. started again.)

15 April: Commences with strong winds and squally. At 6 passed a French chasse-maree, apparently bound to the Banks of



The launch of the steamship 'Great Western' by Wilde Parsons (c. 1920)

Photograph by courtesy of the Director of the Bristol City Art Gallery.



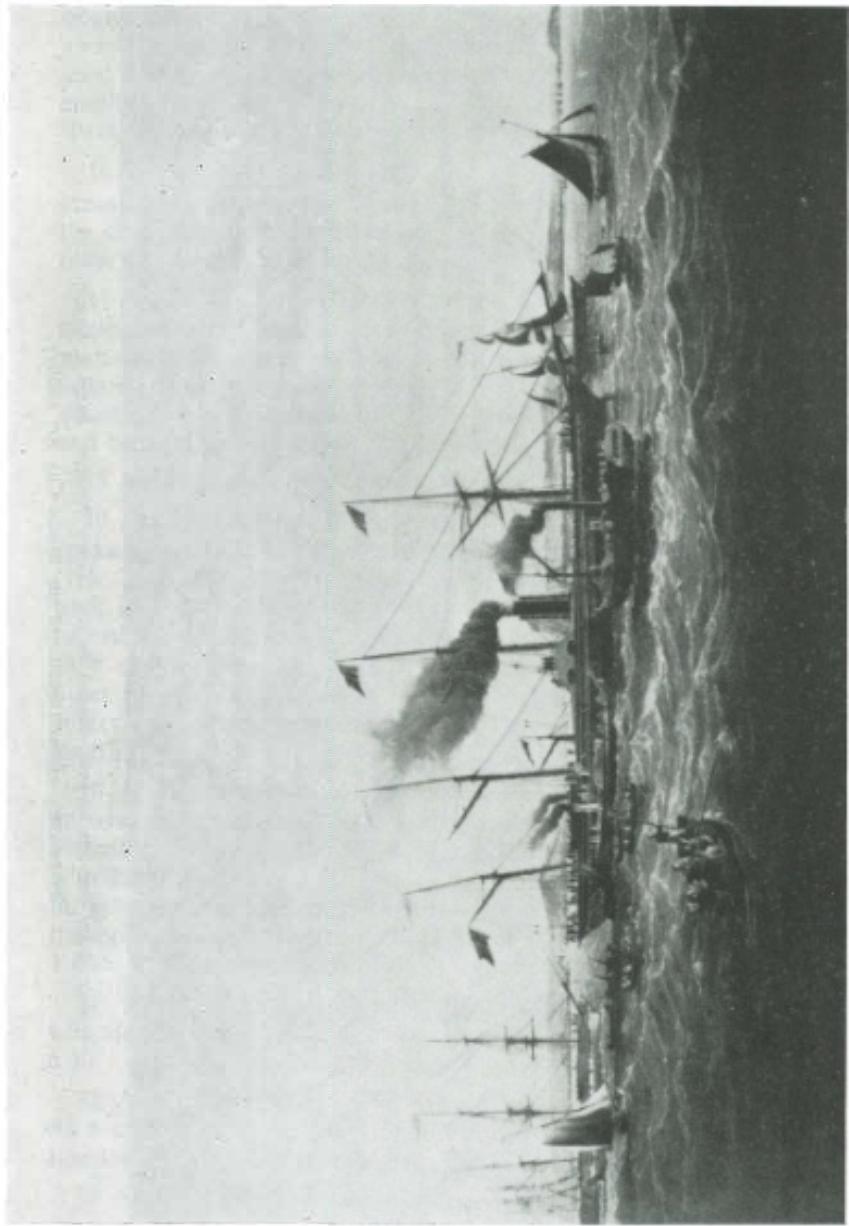
THE GREAT WESTERN STEAM SHIP,

intended to trade between BRISTOL and NEW YORK

leaving Bristol on the morning of the 18th Aug 1837, in tow of the Lamm Steam Tug and accompanied by the Bristol and Liverpool Steamers
for the purpose of proceeding to London to receive her Passengers

The 'Great Western' leaving Bristol Docks for the Thames to be engined 18 August 1837.

By courtesy of the Director of the Bristol City Museum.



The 'Great Western.' From an aquatint by R. & A. W. Reeve after T. Walter. Published 1840.
By courtesy of the National Maritime Museum.

SHIPPED in good Order and Condition, ~~the~~ **The Great Western Steam Ship Company**, is
and upon the good Ship called the "GREAT WESTERN," whereof
is Master for the present Voyage now riding at Anchor in the Port of Bristol, and bound for
New York, to say,

26.6. - 28 -

Oct. 6. - 18 -

being marked and numbered as in the Margin, and are to be delivered in like good Order and Condition at the aforesaid Port of New York, (all and every the *Dangers and Accidents of the Seas and of Navigation of whatever Nature or Kind, never excepted*) into Assigns; he or they paying Freight for the said Goods, with Premium and Average accustomed at Four Dollars and Eighty Cents to the Pound sterling. In witness whereof the Master or Purser of the said Ship hath affirmed to  Bills of Lading, all of this tenor, and date; the one of which Bills being

Receipt for one box of gold shipped by the 'Great Western,' dated 1 August 1839.

By courtesy of the Director of the Bristol City Art Gallery.

Newfoundland to fish. At 7 spoke the brig *Henry Brougham*, bound for London, asked to be reported. At 8.40 squally, carried away fore topmast, two feet above the cap, the top-gallant mast and yard and fore cross trees were carried away by its fall. All hands employed clearing the wreck until 6 p.m., carpenter getting other spars ready. At 2 p.m. got the spare topmast up and rigged it.

16 April: Commences with squally weather. At daylight increasing winds, with heavy rain, and a heavy swell. Carried away the clue lashing of the inner jib. At 8, winds increasing [took] in outer jib, foresail and topsail, and mizen spencer.

17 April: At 5 shipped a sea into the gig and split her. At 6 p.m. stopped the engines for 20 minutes to tighten the screws of the plummer blocks and get a cast of the lead; sounded ground 26 fathoms, and proceeded at full speed. (Difficulty in maintaining steam by reason the coal cannot be got from the ends of the ship and brought to the furnaces fast enough for consumption.)

18 April: Commences with moderate wind and frosty weather.

19 April: Strong winds and heavy westerly swell up. At 4.30 spoke the American ship *Jefferson* of Baltimore, from London for New York, out 35 days. At 8 carried away mizen spencer gaff, took in the sail, fitted the bonnet on the fore stay sail. (At 10 turned all stokers and trimmers to get coal from extreme ends of ship and promised them half dollar each. At noon, starboard outer plummer block worked hot, cooled it with aqua. Crooks, stoker, apparently intoxicated, turned in and left work—a lazy shuffling fellow.)

20 April: Strong wind and hazy. (Crooks not doing his duty, apparently intoxicated. On remonstrating with him he gave me violent abuse, followed me on deck and there defied the Captain, who had him secured on the poop immediately. From thence he got free and attempted to throw the Captain overboard from the poop ladder. The rest knocked off till Crooks released. At 1 p.m. Crooks complained of illness, gave him medicine.)

21 April: Commences with light winds and cloudy with a moderate swell. At 2 a heavy snow shower which lasted until 5.30.

22 April: Commenced with strong winds and frosty weather. At 6 spoke the American ship *Westminster*, from New York for London, requested to be reported.

23 April: Commences with moderate winds and fine weather. At 10 stopped 5 minutes to receive pilot. At 11.30 saw the land ahead. At 2 entered the port of New York, fired a gun. At 3 was

saluted by Fort Ellis' Island and returned it, and by every steamer which we returned, we were also saluted by the *Sirius* which we returned. At 5 moored at Pike Street Wharf, was cheered enthusiastically by the multitude of inhabitants assembled. The Chief Engineer, George Pearne, was severely scalded in the act of blowing off the boilers, Roberts slightly.

The *Sirius* had started from Cork at noon on 4 April and arrived at Sandy Hook at 10 p.m. on the 22nd, when she was put aground. On her last few days at sea she had to burn cabin furniture and other woodwork, and was thankful to be able to take in 50 tons of coal at the pilot station. She steamed on into New York harbour the next morning and arrived at about noon, only 3½ hours before the *Great Western*. It was, appropriately enough, Saint George's Day. Had the heavy weather continued in the Atlantic there is every probability that the Bristol vessel would have arrived first for her daily averages were more consistent. In brief, the *Sirius* took 19 days, and the *Great Western* 15 days and 5 hours although having to steam about 220 miles farther. The logged distance of the *Sirius* (to Sandy Hook only, which is about 20 miles from New York) was 2,982, although her Captain's journal gave 2,897 miles, and the *Great Western* logged 3,223 miles. The best and worst day's runs were 220 and 85, and 243 and 169 respectively, while the averages were 161 miles per day (6.7 knots), and 210 miles (8.75 knots). On the vital matter of coal consumption, the *Sirius* took 400 tons from Cork and used only slightly less than the *Great Western* in spite of the difference in size and power. Pearne thought he had 660 tons on board, but subsequently this figure was found to be 600 tons. However, it was ample as the *Great Western* used only 456 tons, 12 cwt., or about 30 tons per day. Her early steam troubles were partly due to mixed coals as a hundred tons were shipped to London in August, 1837, stored in the open and put on board in March, 1838. However, in spite of such setbacks the consumption was far less than Dr. Lardner's anticipated 1,348 tons.

Affording comic relief from the formidable statistics, the New York newspapers indulged in delirious reporting. The *Weekly Herald* showed the joy of the Irish element at the success of the *Sirius*.—

Oh, what a row, what a rumpus and a rioting,
Sure such a glorious sight was never seen before.

Speechifying,

Drinking, dying,

Laughing, crying,

Eating, lying,

Such a set of merry men can meet on earth no more.

The *Enquirer*, in reporting the arrivals, waxed philosophical.—

'The steam ships, having crossed the ocean with unprecedented dispatch, arrived on the 23rd bringing with them the most irrefragable testimony of the practicability of steam navigation between the Old and New Worlds. The news of the arrival of the *Sirius* spread like wild fire through the city, and the river became literally dotted all over with boats conveying the curious to and from the stranger. There seemed to be a universal voice of congratulation, and every visage was illuminated with delight. A tacit conviction seemed to pervade every bosom that a most doubtful problem had been most satisfactorily solved; visions of future advantage to science, to commerce, to moral philosophy, began to float before the "mind's eye"; curiosity to travel through the OLD COUNTRY, and to inspect ancient institutions, began to stimulate the enquiring; all were delighted, every one was a speaker, every Englishman was giving vent to the proud emotions of his heart. Whilst all this was going on, suddenly there was seen over Governor's Island, a dense black cloud of smoke spreading itself upwards. On it came with great rapidity . . . It was the steamship *Great Western* making her triumphant entry. This immense moving mass was propelled at a rapid rate through the waters of the Bay; she passed swiftly and gracefully round the *Sirius*. If the public mind was stimulated by the arrival of the *Sirius*, it became almost intoxicated with delight upon view of the superb *Great Western*

The *Sirius* stayed a week at New York and the *Great Western* a fortnight. There was no trace of animosity between the Captains and crews, for whom there were civic banquets and lavish entertainment. Thousands visited the two vessels and on a day set apart for the fair sex a number variously given as five and as ten thousand ladies swarmed aboard the *Great Western*.

The *Great Western* started homeward on 7 May, leaving Pike Street Wharf at 11.30 a.m., and steaming to No. 1 Pier where she took on board 68 passengers, 5,500 letters and 1,760 newspapers. She had already loaded a cargo of cotton for the Great Western Cotton Mills, then recently opened at Bristol, as well as small quantities of silks and indigo. She left the Pier at 2.20 p.m. amid scenes of great enthusiasm and was escorted to Sandy Hook by scores of small craft. There she stopped about a quarter of an hour to disembark the pilot and some visitors, heading out into the Atlantic at 5.15. Two hours later the larboard connecting rod brass (bearing pad) broke and the cylinder had to be disconnected while repairs were made. She ran on the starboard cylinder the whole of the next day and until 8 p.m. on the 9th, when repairs were completed and both were coupled again. Similar trouble occurred several times on the passage. The bearing became very hot and had to be loosened, with the consequence that it wore down quickly and had to be retightened. The log records five stops of about five minutes duration on account of this trouble. In addition to these handicaps she had head winds for nine days, and on one day a very severe gale. She dropped anchor in King-road at 10 a.m. on the 22nd, after a creditable passage of just under

15 days. She had used only 392 tons of coal, or 27 tons per day on an average, which compared very favourably with the 30 tons per day outward.

On her arrival back at her home port there were scenes of wild enthusiasm. Church towers rocked with the peal of bells, windows rattled with the saluting guns. The passengers, embarking on river packets, were escorted up the Avon to the City Docks by myriads of small craft and pleasure steamers. The special representatives of *The Times* and the *Morning Herald*, having secured their 'copy' at Kingroad, posted to Maidenhead by express coach, and then took train on the new railway to London. *The Times* correspondent reported: 'I had a full view of the majestic vessel immediately after her passing the Holms and nothing could exceed the beauty of her appearance as she gallantly breasted the waves, and, although a smart breeze was blowing from the north-west she sailed triumphantly along without rolling in the slightest degree . . .

So the epoch-making first voyage was completed. Although much detail was to be learned in coming years, the first great stride had been taken, the Bristol ship had proved that a steamship could cross the Atlantic with passengers, with cargo, and with coal to spare at the finish. The economic possibilities of a liner service were no longer the shuttlecock of theorists, pessimists, and wishful thinkers.

During 1838 the *Great Western* made five round voyages, averaging 16 days and 1½ hours, with an average of 89 passengers, outwards; or 13 days and 4 hours, with 90 passengers, homewards. The *Sirius* made her second voyage and then returned to her original coastal work. The Transatlantic Steamship Company, of Liverpool, also keen to avoid delay in entering the trade, chartered from the City of Dublin Steam Packet Company the *Royal William*, an Irish Sea packet even smaller than the *Sirius*, and sent her across to New York in July. She was joined by a larger vessel, the *Liverpool*, in November, but neither were particularly formidable rivals. In winter the smaller one had to refuse cargo in order to carry sufficient fuel, and the *Liverpool* made a bad start by using so much coal on her first passage that, when six days out in the Atlantic, she was put about to return to Cork for more. The line went into liquidation in 1840, selling another large ship it had ordered before she left the builder's yard. The British and American Steam Navigation Company got their fine and well-appointed ship, the *British Queen*, (rather larger than the *Great Western*,) ready to start from Liverpool in July, 1839, but

this line also did not prosper. In 1841 their second, even larger, ship, the *President*, went missing with all hands on her second voyage, and the *British Queen*, after only nine voyages, was sold to Belgians in the same year.

The first real threat to the Great Western Steamship Company came from Samuel Cunard, the Quaker from Halifax, Nova Scotia, who came to England in 1839 to seek support for a bold plan to build four 'Great Westerns' for a service between Liverpool, Halifax, and Boston. His first vessel, the *Britannia*, left Liverpool on 4 July, 1840, and the others quickly followed. Here was a complete fleet. Although the vessels were slightly smaller than the *Great Western* their numbers ensured the establishment of a reliable and comparatively frequent service.

As early as August, 1838, the Great Western Steamship Company had announced their intention to build their second vessel, to be called the *City of New York*, and they went so far as to buy a cargo of African timber for the hull. The genius of Brunel, however, was adverse to repeating a proven model, and within six months the plans were changed to embrace an iron vessel of great size. With the name *Great Britain*, she eventually began to ply in 1845, and although she was a triumph of mechanical engineering,—the first large iron steamer and the first large screw steamer,—she was too late to help the port become the principal terminal for Atlantic trade.

The failure of the Great Western Company to provide consorts for their vessel was a decisive factor in their losing the mail contract, which would have given them a most useful subsidy. They had only one vessel which they had to lay up each year for refitting, this being done in the winter when the passenger trade was slack. When the Government in 1839 advertised for tenders to carry the mails to America twelve times a year, the Bristol Company offered the service for £45,000, although it was obvious they would have to rely on chartered bottoms for one or two voyages in the year, unless they could quickly augment their own fleet. The company thought the contract was in their pocket, since they had the support of prominent citizens on both sides of the Atlantic and, through their railway connections, many friends in Parliament. Cunard, who had four vessels on the stocks, knew that he had a far better chance of keeping up a continuous service, and he decided boldly to tender for thirty round voyages for £60,000. This the Admiralty accepted. Nobody could blame them, but in fairness they should have stated they were prepared to accept tenders for more than twelve voyages before they closed

the contract. Appeals to the House did not upset the decision, however, and Cunard began to carry the mails in 1841. Debates on the ocean mail services were frequent in Parliament for several years to come.

As if the mail rumpus was not sufficiently disappointing, the Great Western Steamship Company had found serious trouble where they least expected it—in their own port. The ship could not safely use the existing docks and had to lie in Kingroad, or at the 'Western Moorings' off Morgan's Pill, loading and discharging by means of lighters. Notwithstanding this, the Docks Company levied their dues of £106 per voyage, with as much again on the cargo. The Steamship Company petitioned to have the dock entrance widened, but the Dock Company, having recently spent large sums of money on improvements, would spend no more and replied that "it was manifestly unjust to be defeated of their profits by the building of ships too large to enter the harbour." Every other body in Bristol realised the danger of losing the Atlantic trade, and a committee was formed representing the Council, the Society of Merchants, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Great Western Steamship Company. They prepared an ambitious, but practicable, scheme of improvements to the port with suggested means of increasing the capital to cover the cost. The Docks Company remained adamant, however, and merely picked the scheme to pieces, estimating the costs of the improvements at sums up to twice as much. When, at one stage, second thoughts induced the Docks to refund a part of the dues, Counsel's opinion was sought by malcontents and it was decided that refunds were not permissible under the terms of the Docks Act. Stalemate was reached. J. R. Dix, a local wit, in his 'Rambling Rhymes,' summed up the position:-

The *Western* an un-natural parent has,
For all her beauty;
Her mother never harboured her, and yet
She asks for duty.
Hull, Liverpool and other ports aloud
Cry "Go ahead!"
A certain place that I know seems to say
"Reverse," instead.

At the end of 1838 the *Great Western* was taken off service for seven weeks and was dry-docked in the naval dockyard at Pembroke. It was announced at the next meeting of the shareholders that, although she had steamed 35,000 miles and experienced 36 days of heavy gales, she required no caulking and her copper sheathing was as smooth as when new. Her sixth voyage com-

menced on 28 January, 1839 and in that year six voyages were made, finishing at Kingroad on 30th November. Space does not permit descriptions of the voyages, but suffice it to record that the year's average outward passage was of 17 days, 12 hours (with 114 passengers), and homeward 13 days, 17 hours (with 67 passengers). At this time some joint publicity by the principal steamship companies, with the aim of rebutting the insinuations of the sailing packet companies, showed that the *Great Western* was undoubtedly the fastest in the trade, and that, comparing an average of the steam passages with the average of the sailing passages, steam beat sail by 17 days outward and 7½ days homeward.

For the 1839-40 winter refit the *Great Western* was docked at Bristol, her paddles being removed to facilitate the passage of the locks. The refit was leisurely and ran on for nearly three months, a fact which was thrown against her in mail contract debates. While she was in dock the iron keel of her future consort was laid, without ceremony, in a dock especially excavated for the purpose.

For 1840 the pattern of voyages remained the same. She completed six and was again laid up for three months at Bristol. She did not resume until April, 1841; and then she had time for only five voyages in that year. In 1842, in an effort to avoid the high dock dues she ended her first, third and fifth voyages at Liverpool.

This was the final chapter in a sorry story. So many advantages were evident including, for instance, the incomparable convenience of a quay-side berth, that from 1843 she made Liverpool her terminus for all voyages, returning to Bristol only for the winter. It thus came about that her departure on 11 February, 1843, the first voyage of that season, was the last departure of an American liner from the port of Bristol for 28 years. The Docks Company had lost a golden opportunity to take full advantage of the railway from London, which was opened on 30 June, 1841, the most direct and therefore the most efficient route for many years to come. A thoroughly disillusioned municipality took over the docks undertaking in 1848, but that was too late to help the Great Western Steamship Company, or to challenge the firm hold that Liverpool had gained on the Atlantic passenger traffic.

The *Great Western* made five voyages in the 1843 season, and then had an extended refit at Bristol, during which she was fitted with new tubular boilers and new paddle wheels. After this there was time for only three voyages in 1844. Captain Hosken having been transferred to the new vessel, then being fitted out, her Chief Mate Barnard R. Matthews was promoted to the command from June of that year.

The long awaited *Great Britain* made her maiden voyage from Liverpool in July, 1845, and for an all too brief period it seemed that the Great Western Steamship Company might return to prosperity. However, the new ship stranded in Dundrum Bay in September, 1846, owing to a navigational error, at the outset of her fifth voyage. Salvage was difficult, lengthy and costly and afterwards the Company found itself quite unable to pay the £22,000 needed for repairs. But that is part of another story.

The *Great Western* made two further voyages after the disaster to her consort and on arriving at Liverpool on 12 December, 1846, was taken off service. During her eight years on the New York run she had made 45 voyages. She had carried 4,318 passengers westward, and returned with about 3,357. Unfortunately, data for calculating the average of her passages is incomplete, but to the end of 1844 they stood at 15 days and 12 hours outwards, and 13 days and 9 hours homewards, not including a voyage made via Madeira in 1843.

The ship was taken to Bristol and laid up in the Floating Harbour. At an auction on 11 March, 1847, she was withdrawn at £20,000. On 24 April it was announced that she had been sold to the West India Royal Mail Steam Packet Company for £24,750. That concern had just lost their *Tweed* in the Gulf of Mexico, and there was some urgency to replace her to avoid penalties under the mail contract. The *Great Western* was immediately taken round to Southampton and sailed from thence for the first time on 2nd June. She thereafter ran successfully for ten years on this service, with an interlude in 1855 trooping to the Crimea under Government charter. Finally, in October, 1856, she and another of the line, the *Severn*, were sold to shipbreakers at Vauxhall on the Thames, for £11,500 the two.

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